

Reptiles

By Kathy Hill

There are 84 native species of reptiles in California, including lizards, snakes, and turtles (CDFG and CIWTG 2002). Reptiles are considered cold-blooded because their body temperature is determined by their surrounding environment. To warm up in the morning, reptiles will bask in the sun on dark colored surfaces, which absorb heat readily. This is why snakes and lizards are often seen on roads; the dark asphalt helps them warm up quickly.

Although there are reptiles in nearly all of California, most species are found in the desert areas because reptiles are well adapted to that extreme environment. Despite being called cold-blooded, many reptiles have optimum body temperatures much warmer than normal human temperature. For instance, the desert iguana (*Dipsosaurus dorsalis*) of the Mojave and Colorado deserts can be seen running around on the hottest summer days. Reptiles also have scale-covered skin, which keeps them from losing moisture, and thus protects them from a hot, dry environment.



Desert iguana (*Dipsosaurus dorsalis*)
Photo © Peter L. Knapp



Desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*)
Photo © Karen Wyatt



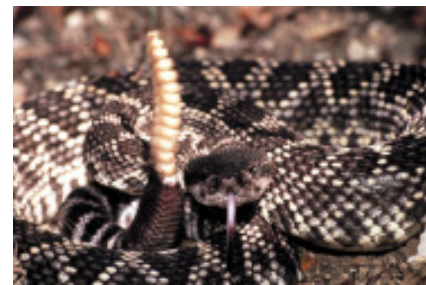
Mojave fringe-toed lizard (*Uma scoparia*)
DFG photo: Tom King



Baja California collared lizard
(*Crotaphytus vestigium*)
Photo © Sherburn R. Sanborn

California has 45 taxa of native snakes.

Certain places, like the Sierra Nevada foothills, are high in snake species diversity. The trees, rock outcrops, and caves of the foothills provide cover in a variety of habitats. The foothills also provide protection from winter flooding. In California's natural hydrology, much of the valley floor was flooded during the winter and spring months and provided habitat for aquatic reptiles such as garter snakes (*Thamnophis* spp.) and western pond turtles (*Clemmys marmorata*). However, these Central Valley reptiles also require non-flooding habitats above the flood plain, such as hills, levees, and rock outcrops, for winter hibernation.



Of all the snakes in California, only the rattlesnakes (*Crotalus* spp.) can be dangerous to humans. Rattlesnakes use their venom to subdue prey, which are mainly rodents. They also use venom to defend themselves if they are threatened.
Photo © David Welling

Mojave and Colorado Desert Regions

The Mojave and Colorado deserts together range up to 4,000 feet in elevation and cover most of the southeastern part of the state. These regions are the home of three national parks and monuments—Death Valley, East Mojave, and Joshua Tree—as well as Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, the largest state park in the country. The Mojave Desert is located north of the Colorado Desert, at elevations above 1,000 feet. Creosote scrub dominates most of the Mojave, with Joshua tree (*Yucca brevifolia*) and a greater variety of shrubs at higher elevations. The Colorado Desert, named for its proximity to the lower Colorado River, is actually part of the more extensive Sonoran Desert, which extends east to Arizona and south to Mexico. Vegetation includes cactus scrub, desert wash woodlands, palm oases, saltbush scrub, and alkali sink scrub.



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